

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 218 220

SP 020 056

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TITLE Sameness Drives Me Up a Wall.
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, March 21, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Beginning Teachers; Elementary Secondary Education; Inservice Teacher Education; Role Models; *Self Esteem; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Burnout; *Teacher Effectiveness; *Teacher Morale; *Teacher Orientation; Teacher Persistence; Teacher Supervision

ABSTRACT

Research has shown that the induction period is the most crucial time of a teacher's career. Characteristics of teachers who demonstrate an open, lively, and continuous desire to learn are quite different from those of teachers who remain static after their beginning years. In interviews, four experienced teachers were asked about initial training, motivation, and induction as teachers. They were chosen as interview subjects because they were self confident and possessed high energy levels. Each teacher represented different age groups: twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties and sixties. The interviews gathered pertinent background information which revealed differences in the teachers' orientation experiences. Differences in teachers' attitudes were also apparent in the teachers' perceptions of their colleagues and in their evaluations of themselves. Characteristics common to all four teachers were deep commitment, genuine caring, and the goal to become better teachers and to learn more. It is concluded that significant improvement in teacher education could occur if preservice teachers were exposed to positive, dedicated, somewhat selfless role models and that beginning teachers should be treated as respected colleagues whose contributions are worth serious acknowledgement. (FG)

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SAMENESS DRIVES ME UP A WALL

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Prepared for: RDCTE/JTE AERA Public Forum on Induction
New York City, March 21, 1982

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In the light of current and potential future political, economic, and human considerations, focus on the induction period of the teacher training program has come at a good time. Limited numbers of new teachers will be coming to their first classroom assignments in the foreseeable future. For example, in Lincoln, Nebraska, there were 85 "new to Lincoln" teachers in the Fall of 1981, as compared with 139 just 5 years earlier. Even of this smaller number, only 32 were actually beginning their teaching careers.

Because of this trend, the school district has lost, or is losing, a very important factor in its ability to change. There will continue to be drastically restricted input from new people with new ideas. Public school educators recognize (often reluctantly) that the staff we have now is essentially the one we will have for many years to come.

Consequently, it is extremely important that the right potential teachers be recruited, that they receive superior preservice education, and most importantly, that their beginning teaching experiences inspire them to continue to grow and become more effective throughout their professional careers.

Through one of the most comprehensive studies of the trials and tribulations of the beginning teacher reported in 1980, researchers for the Beginning Teacher Education Study¹ confirmed what many of us have long believed--the induction period is the most crucial period of a teacher's career.

In reviewing the data presented, one has the impression that young beginning teachers are placed in a lonely "sink or swim" situation. They frequently feel overwhelmed, and are obliged to learn most of their survival skills on a kind of trial and error basis. There is often a kind of desperation. It is no wonder that they suffer from arrested development.

The authors of this study suggest that after the induction period, teachers take one of two courses. A limited number tend to continue to demonstrate an open, lively, continuous desire to learn more and get better at their work. Unfortunately, most tend to remain static, resistant to change, and unenthusiastic about continuing their professional development.

Two quotations from the study underscore this contention.

"... we are reasonably certain that a substantial number of teachers are shaped by the experiences of the transition period, and that some number of them never change from that point on." ² (Ibid. p. 10)

"We believe that the seeds of "burn-out" are planted during this period. We think that some of the resistance to inservice activities, to curriculum development activities, to other efforts to improve the complexity and level of teaching are born out of the experience of having survived the transitional period—essentially alone."³ (Ibid. p. 14)

However, in reflecting on this rather bleak state of affairs, one becomes aware that some teachers clearly do not fit the stereotype. These special teachers seem to exhibit a high energy level and remarkable self-confidence; most from the beginning. They have a genuine sense of who they are and an awareness of their own professional competence. They display a sophisticated sense of humour. It is easy for them to acknowledge what they do well and what they could do better (and they usually are working on some self-improvement project of their own choice or design). They exhibit a highly developed sense that anything worth doing is worth doing to the best of their ability. They are impatient with those who do not wish to go the second mile—particularly where students are concerned. Their view of education is integrated and whole, rather than piecemeal. In spite of the fact that they willingly (and frequently) confront their peers who have a lesser commitment to excellence, they enjoy unmistakable respect among their contemporaries. Their frustrations come primarily from

limitations to their creativity. They require freedom to move in ways which they feel will make education better (often in opposition to the status quo). They have a lively interest in theory and its application. Their sense of time is flexible and determined largely by the nature of the task. They are different not so much because of any one of these elements but because of the combination and particularly the intensity and independence with which they approach their professional lives.

As I thought about the 1500+ professional staff members with whom I have worked for the past thirteen years, obvious examples of the "unstuck" ones came immediately to mind. Since the Beginning Teacher Education Study had reported that little had been done to document what happens to teachers during the induction period for even a day, much less a week or a month, it occurred to me that I might informally collect some of that data, using as my resources some of those individuals whose insatiable desire to be better teachers is so obvious.

In order to provide some variety in my data, I interviewed one teacher from each of the following age ranges: the twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties. There was a little slippage in the latter--I had thought one teacher was in her fifties but discovered that she was into her sixties, which probably says something about why she was selected in this totally biased sample. These teachers represent each of the teaching levels: elementary, junior high, and high school. They responded to questions about their personal view of themselves, their initial training, their student teaching experience, and their beginning teaching experience. They also made introspective comments about how they perceive themselves to be different from their colleagues, and how they view their potential and need for growth and change.

Selection of these teachers was purely on the basis of professional judgment based on perceived attitudes and demonstrated behaviors which contrast with the picture of the static teacher.

What motivated them?

Teacher A represents the 50-60 age group. Initially she had no interest in becoming a teacher. She "drifted" into the teachers college because she had no clear sense of direction. Her description of how she arrived at that position was, "I was just 'dumped' in it. I had never wanted to be a teacher." For many years, she has been a highly respected English department chairperson.

Teacher B is the forties-person. She also drifted into teaching rather than moving purposefully into it. Her description of her decision: "I had decided either to go back to school or have another baby. Obviously, I chose school. I opted for teaching since I could manage it along with my family and because I thought it suited my temperament—I liked kids. I was twenty-nine when I started back to school." She teaches high school art.

Teacher C is 31. He, too, came into education almost by default. In his words, "I was in college with an arts and sciences background. Friends were starting to talk about the vocations they would enter, with their degrees in architecture, law, pre-med. I began to wonder what occupation I would have with an English degree. I liked learning and books, I liked discussion and people—so, I asked myself, 'Why not be a teacher (for a while)?' " He has taught on a junior high English/Social Studies team, and now teaches English at the high school level.

Teacher D is in her twenties. She differs from the other four in that she has always wanted to be a teacher, since the time that she was very young. She worked constantly with young children during her growing-up years in church and city

recreation. A particular interest was work with retarded youngsters. She has taught primary children for five years. Before the end of her first year, she announced firmly that she intended to become one of the teacher-leaders who work with new teachers during their induction period because she had found her own help so useful. And she did.

What were their beginning teaching experiences like?

The beginning teaching experience of these four could hardly have been more different. For three of them, the experiences were equally satisfying. For the fourth, the experience was almost totally unacceptable. Their own words describe the experiences best:

Teacher A. "I was the most unsuccessful teacher that Iowa ever hired. My schedule was this: all the high school English (four preparations), 8 through 12, two 3-act plays plus a one-act play contest, declamatory contest, library, study hall, journalism, and girl's club sponsor. Nobody could have succeeded, so I just giggled my way through. I didn't take it seriously. I didn't even grade papers.

I had no overall plan whatever—they gave me the books and said, 'Here they are.' So I gave the students a page a day, and if we got through that page, we did. I skipped the racy parts of Shakespeare because I was too embarrassed. I didn't even admit to my family that I hated teaching and was such a failure.

Finally, after gradually changing jobs to more manageable ones and gaining more skills, I arrived in a situation where my real career began. We had guides, opportunity to write curriculum, and to learn from experienced teachers. I have loved teaching from that time.

I think I started out with everything in isolation, with nothing related. Now I see how important it is to see things as related—to have an overall view rather than bits and pieces. That's my goal now—to help students see those relationships."

Teachers 2, 3, and 4 give high praise to their supervising teacher role models. Teacher 4 describes her exemplar as "having a positive personality, having positive interactions with children, being caring and extremely competent. They acted glad they were at school. They spent their time productively rather than attacking each other, or education, or kids."

Teacher 2: "Both my supervising teachers were super-teachers. They also wanted very much for me to succeed and put in a lot of extra time and effort to make sure that I did. They were very honest. When I didn't know what I did wrong, they explained it carefully and gave me several options for correcting the problems. They 'eased' me into it gradually until I was ready to assume all the responsibility. I also student-taught the whole day so that I saw the whole reality, rather than a piece of it. I had a sense that they wanted to teach me all they knew. I learned to teach from them--not in education class. I was lucky. I had really caring, supportive persons who genuinely wanted me there and with whom I worked very well. Of course, I worked like crazy, too. I still do."

"I had super experiences in pre-student teaching," reported teacher 3. "Luckily, I was placed in an innovative, receptive, responsive, educational environment, working with Piagetian learning theory, and new approaches to grouping students exclusive of ability grouping. I got excited and loved it. The teachers were in the throes of trying to learn a new model. They didn't have an answer, but they were trying to find one, and they didn't seem to feel the need to dictate to me. They took an active interest in my ideas, and asked me to analyze my own educational experiences as data. They treated me as a responsible, contributing member of their team and involved me in all their brainstorming sessions. I felt they genuinely welcomed my input. I thought, 'My God--I'm still in college--I'm not sure my input has any relevance.' And I'm not sure it did. But the way they listened to me got me so completely interested in their programs that I put in many more hours in the pre-student teaching experience

than almost any other prospective teachers were putting in at the time. Luckily, I was assigned to the same team for student teaching and hired there for my first job.

From my discussions with other student teachers, I had become painfully aware that I was in a unique situation. Many of the others had become bookkeepers, paper readers, hall monitors, and very small group leaders--if they were lucky. Others became very good typists. They probably didn't spend as much time as I did--as we did--we spent hours, because we enjoyed it. It didn't seem like work."

How do these teachers differ from their associates?

These four teachers have mixed perceptions of their contemporaries. When asked what percent of their colleagues are like them, and how they perceive themselves to be different, they respond in different ways.

Teacher A describes her department as "a very dedicated group who are student-oriented. Teachers like students. They want to improve their teaching and are willing to try new things. We like to work together very well and are willing to share ideas and expertise. We have much compassion in our department--concern for one another, and that has nearly always been the case except for a very few who have dropped by the wayside. When people come into the department feeling insecure, they learn to trust us and we are all proud of each other. I invite new members to come observe my classroom and we all try to do some visiting back and forth."

Teacher B is less kind. She feels that "very few" (1-2%) of her contemporaries are essentially similar to her in terms of their attitude toward, and approach to, their work.

She explains the difference, "Age-wise I'm behind because I started school later. I haven't taught as many years as other teachers my age. Maybe that's part of the reason I'm a maverick. I look for other experiences and new ways of

doing things. I get a whole lot more excited than a lot of people do. I just want to push them and say, 'Don't you really want to get excited about anything--don't you care about anything enough to get up and do something different?' I can't stand being in a rut—I get bored very easily."

Teacher C makes the same kind of assessment. "Maybe one in ten have a similar perspective. I don't mean that as a putdown and to elevate myself. My first assignment was the difference. I was raised professionally in a climate where innovation was respected. If in an autocratic regime, the 'good' teacher will follow the rules; keep a tidy classroom; maintain an orderly group of students at all times in their classroom, in the hall, and for God's sake in the lunchroom; keep attendance records absolutely up to par; explain his or her gradebook without even having to look at it. Not that these things aren't important—they are—but they aren't paramount. Some of my best days in teaching would probably be classed as disorderly, if not even chaotic, but kids are turned-on and learning is taking place—for all of us.

If you've never experienced a situation where it's okay to break the mold occasionally and to realize that the foundations of the building will not crumble because you forgot to take attendance second period, it's probably impossible to get a sense of the overriding idea of education. If I had been in a different situation at the beginning I don't think I every would have taught. I would have looked again at insurance. Now my enthusiasm is waning. So is my interest in the profession. I'm no longer finding people to work with who have the same collaborative desires I do. Most don't want to give the extra time to make it enervating. I still have colleagues in the district who feel like I do, so I'm still learning a lot, but there are blocks in the way which prevent people from being creative and growing.

I see it as a profession which requires more time than others. We may spend four hours, or we may spend fifteen—that's what a profession is all about. When problems arise, midnight oil is needed. That's fun. It's the instability that makes me a stable teacher in my profession. Sameness drives me up a wall.

I don't see attitudes about teaching changing. Most people teach content. I teach people, and I see a lot of unfeeling content specialists—very few humanists. That bothers me. I get so tired of hearing, 'What's wrong with these kids? Why can't they learn?', as opposed to 'What am I doing wrong that's impeding the progress of these kids?' I know it's a two-way street, but I think there are lots of people who aren't willing now to put forth the extra effort."

Teacher D is most positive. Perhaps her early elementary focus has some bearing on that. She estimates that fifty percent of her associates have a similar attitude and dedication. But she does say that her attitudes are "more positive". Like the other three, she mentioned her willingness—even enthusiasm for giving the extra effort. "I strive to go the extra mile where some settle for average. I'm willing to put forth more effort, and I'm more positive about the kids. I live more positively with the system and administrative decisions than some. Unfortunately, it seems like lots of people come to put in their eight hours and go home. If anything will take more than eight hours, then they're not interested. Even if it would help them or help the children they work with. I don't think that all teachers have a genuine feeling for the kids that they work with, or they'd think 'If something extra might help one kid through, I'll do it.' Instead they think it would be extra work for them, and they think, 'It's only one kid—no big deal.' "

Significance for the future

The deep commitment and genuine caring, the craving to be better, to learn more, to serve better shines from the pages and pages of quotations which were part of

these interviews. What does that all mean in terms of the induction period of new teachers? I think it means that it is imperative that new teachers be exposed to positive, dedicated, somewhat selfless role models during their pre-teaching experiences. It may even be the only significant way we can materially improve the teacher education process.

It also means that it is significant for them to be treated as respected colleagues who are at the very least junior partners in the teaching/learning process and whose contributions are worth giving serious acknowledgement and recognition. It means that those of us who have influence on the direction of schools and school systems must take seriously the challenge of keeping places alive where the creative, restless, caring, devoted, energetic, and un-time-self-conscious in our midst will be able to survive. We desperately need their incalculable continued contribution to the future of our profession, so that opportunities similar to those which nurtured them along toward their paths to excellence will be available to those who follow them. This is particularly and potentially tragically true in this era of retrenchment from innovation, pressure toward conformity, and growing evidence that for many teachers, education is just another job rather than an opportunity to affect the precious lives of those who enter our schools.

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